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**OJINAGA DRUG LORDS CONVICTED**

**(MIDLAND, TEXAS)** Yesterday afternoon, a federal jury sitting in Midland found **FRANCISCO RIOS BALDERRAMA** and 34-year-old **ARMANDO GARCIA QUIROZ** guilty of running a continuing criminal enterprise that distributed over 30,000 kilograms through the West Texas area and other parts of the United States. Balderrama and Quiroz, along with 40-year-old **LUCIANO CHAPA** were also found guilty of conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute more than 1,000 kilograms of marijuana and conspiracy to import from Mexico to the United States more than 1,000 kilograms of marijuana. Balderrama and Quiroz, were also convicted of nine counts of possession with intent to distribute marijuana and acquitted of three counts. Balderrama and Quiroz were convicted of money laundering and conspiracy to commit money laundering. Trial lasted 13 days over a four-week period. The jury deliberated three days.

Balderrama, a/k/a "Kiko," Quiroz, a/k/a "Mando," and Ruben Valdez Carrasco, were known as the "Los Tres De La Sierra" or the "The Three of the Mountain." Their organization was responsible for the importation and distribution of marijuana from Mexico to the United States and the drug proceeds from the United States back to Mexico. The three defendants "held the Plaza" in Ojinaga, Chihuahua, Mexico, for marijuana distribution to the United States; that is to say that they received and sold all the marijuana shipped from Mexico through the United States via the Ojinaga, Chihuahua, Mexico region. For a ten-week period after their capture, no large loads of marijuana were sent through the Ojinaga area into the United States. On October 2, 2001, Carrasco pled guilty to one count of running a continuing criminal enterprise.

During the course of the continuing criminal enterprise, the Los Tres De La Sierra Organization imported to and distributed in the United States over 150,000 pounds or over 68,000 kilograms of marijuana. Each marijuana load imported and distributed by the defendants weighed up to 2000 pounds. Each pound of marijuana cost Balderrama, Quiroz, and Carrasco about \$50 a pound and sold for \$350 per pound. The defendants would sell quantities of marijuana by "fronting" it to the purchaser. "Fronting" is selling the marijuana on consignment; that is, the Los Tres De La Sierra Organization would distribute the marijuana to the purchaser and the purchaser would sell the marijuana and give the money owed back to the defendants.

The defendants kept control of its organization and its marijuana inventory through the use of intimidation and murder. Balderrama was the overall leader of the organization. Quiroz was a partner and Balderrama's "right-hand man." The evidence at trial showed that Balderrama ordered and Quiroz murdered at least five individuals to keep control of their drug organization. Chapa drove marijuana loads and was referred to by Balderrama as one of "his most loyal runners."

The three defendants were initially arrested based on a sealed federal complaint out of Alpine, Texas, charging them with conspiracy to distribute over 1,000 kilograms of marijuana. Based on that complaint, the United States Attorney's Office with the assistance of the Department of Justice's Office of International Affairs, obtained provisional arrest warrants from the Australian courts. In an amazing display of national and international cooperation and coordination, Balderrama and Quiroz were arrested on an airplane about to leave the terminal to fly to Buenos Aires, Argentina, by Australian authorities within 28 hours of DEA receiving a tip that the three were in Sydney for the Olympics. At the United States Attorney's Office request, the Australian authorities allowed Carrasco to board the flight going through Hawaii so that American authorities could make the arrest and avoid the extradition treaty process. On September 11, 2001, Balderrama and Quiroz stole an 18-wheeler and crashed out of and escaped from the high-security Parklea Prison in Sydney, Australia. The Australian Federal Police and the New South Wales Police re-captured the two fugitives on October 1, 2001, in Victoria.

In Mexico, Mexican President Fox's AFI group dealt another heavy blow to Las Tres de la Sierra organization by executing three U.S. arrest requests an apprehending other major players involved in the drug organization: Ismael Espudo, 60, Emilio Rito Mendoza, 42, and Hector Ivan Armendariz, 30. Espudo and Mendoza waived extradition to the U.S., plead guilty, and cooperated with law enforcement. Armendariz is fighting his extradition.

The drug investigation was primarily conducted by the Drug Enforcement Administration Task Forces in Alpine, Midland, Dallas-Fort Worth, and Waco, Texas and Kansas. The murder investigations were conducted by the Texas Rangers. Integral to the drug investigation were the Midland Police Department, the United States Border Patrol, the Internal Revenue Service Criminal Investigation Division, and the United States Custom Service. Assistant United States Attorneys Mark Roomberg and Jay Miller handled the prosecution for the government.

Balderrama and Quiroz face a mandatory life sentence if convicted of the continuing criminal enterprise charge over 30,000 kilograms of marijuana. The United States had to forego seeking the death penalty against Balderrama and Quiroz pursuant to the Australian-United States extradition treaty. The drug conspiracies carry a minimum mandatory sentence of ten years to life imprisonment. Most of the substantive drug counts carry a five year minimum sentence with a maximum 40 year sentence. The money laundering conspiracy and substantive counts each carry a 20 year maximum sentence.

Marcelo Manuel Bernal, 25, was acquitted of all charges.

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